

# how principals SUPPORT teacher effectiveness

A study of two of the state's highest performing high poverty schools finds their principals create cultures of accountability and collaboration to foster teacher effectiveness.

The current standards and accountability regime describes effective teaching as the ability to increase student achievement on standardized tests. This narrow definition of effectiveness can lead principals to create school cultures myopically focused on student achievement data (Goe, Bell & Little, 2008; Wechsler & Shields, 2008).

A “laser-like focus on academic achievement,” (Reeves, 2004; Williams *et al.*, 2010) if employed too literally, can stymie the necessary professional judgment and creativity of teachers and blind school leaders to the potential of collaboration and accountability to serve as the most significant supports to teacher effectiveness.

Last year I explored two of the state's highest performing, high poverty schools and observed how principals support teacher effectiveness in these environments (Gallagher, 2011). In this article I introduce the two schools, then share teacher descriptions of how they embrace collaboration and accountability cultures – created with their

principals – as critical supports to their effectiveness. These themes were prevalent in classroom observations, teacher surveys and interviews. In order to gain honest, insightful analysis, the county, districts, schools, teachers and principals were all told they would be given pseudonyms.

## **Amber school**

Amber School serves more than 400 kindergarten through fifth-grade students in the Mason School District, a mostly suburban K-8 district of around 4,000 students. The school community is surrounded by some of the most affluent neighborhoods in San Vicente County. It would be easy to miss this community, hidden between the expressways and boulevards that whisk travelers from affluent neighborhoods to high technology business parks or Disneyland-like shopping malls.

The school serves the working class and

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*By Michael Gallagher*

first generation immigrant families of the surrounding neighborhood who walk their children to school, are welcomed to create community events on the campus and to shape school policies, and who know that their school has received recognition in local and national media for its rapid improvement of student achievement data.

While once this school was maligned for its poor performance, Amber is now considered a jewel of the community. The school's 810 API was the second highest among its 100 most demographically similar California schools. Amber School's improvement has been dramatic. The school improved 208 points from 2006 to 2010, and the school's similar schools ranking improved from the first decile to the 10th.

The school's demographics are distinct from the district's other schools. Amber is the Mason District's only designated Title I school. While 78 percent of its students participate in the federal free and reduced lunch program, only 28 percent of district students participate in the program. Similarly, while 66 percent of Amber students are English language learners, only 19 percent of district students are classified as English learners. Seventy-six percent of Amber students are Hispanic, while in the district only 32 percent of students are Hispanic. Only 13 percent of district parents reported that they did not graduate from high school, compared to 52 percent of Amber School parents.

### Ryan School

Ryan School serves about 400 kindergarten through fifth-grade students in the San Marcos Unified School District, a K-12 district of more than 10,000 students. The former and new principals and teachers take pride in the school's reputation for outstanding academic achievement. They note that though Ryan is one of the three highest poverty schools in the district, its 894 API in 2010 was the district's third highest API and was the highest API among its 100 most demographically similar schools.

The neatly arranged rows of classrooms, the expansive blacktop and fields, and the school's multi-purpose room and office are clean, well maintained and inviting. The surrounding neighborhood feels much the

same: quiet, carefully planned, and spacious for a school and neighborhood with "urban" demographic characteristics. Fourplexes and single family homes surround the school.

A visitor to the school might assess Ryan as typical of public elementary schools in San Vicente County. Like many of the county's schools, the largest ethnic group is Hispanic/Latino, with 51 percent of the student population. The rest of the school's population



resembles the diversity of the county: 13 percent of the students are Asian, 11 percent are Filipino, 9 percent are white, and 6 percent are African American. The school serves a decidedly underprivileged community. At Ryan School 76 percent of students qualify for the federal free and reduced lunch program and 52 percent of the students are not yet fully English proficient.

### How data supports teacher effectiveness

Principals at both schools have created data and accountability systems that their teachers describe as significant supports to their effectiveness. Melissa, a fourth-year teacher at Amber, said that praise for her effectiveness as a teacher, as measured by achievement data, buoys her spirits, especially when she considers the challenging nature of her assignment. She is also praised for her skill using data to differentiate instruction based on student needs.

Gloria, a 14-year veteran teacher at Ryan School, noted that assessment data gives her an unbiased gauge of her students' academic

progress, since she suspects her care for her students might blind her to the truth of their achievement.

### A rigorous testing timeline

Standards, assessment and data are the most prominent concepts at Amber, but these elements of accountability are aligned with coaching, collaboration and professional judgment. The school's rhythm – from professional development to grade-

level Professional Learning Community meetings, to day-in-day-out observable, in-the-classroom activities – reflect the pre-eminence of these concepts.

Teachers at Amber School feel the urgency of the standards and accountability mandates, but now that they have seen the dramatic rise in their test scores, they embrace accountability because it measures and documents their effectiveness.

Tanya, the new principal at Amber, has worked at the school for more than 15 years. When reflecting on the shift in culture that occurred just four years ago, she recalled her first year as a teacher on special assignment, and she described her new principal and assistant principal as supporting instructional improvement through coaching focused on measureable results. She said, "The three of us made decisions, trained people, coached people and pulled data."

Amber School's Susan, the senior-most teacher on the staff, explained that though the prevalence of data contributes to making teachers feel successful, "the data is re-

ally about individual students and their learning.” She emphasized that the most significant and rewarding test scores are not reported in the newspaper. For example, she described teachers celebrating the success of a student who moved from 7 percent proficiency to 35 percent proficiency.

The testing timeline at Amber is rigorous, but teachers have embraced it because the results for these assessments guide their practice, reveal successes, and lead to improved performance on the California Standards Test.

Testing cycles dominate teacher planning and the instructional day. Teachers are frequently seen individually testing students while other students work independently. Even kindergarten and first-grade teachers begin preparing students for the CST by simulating standardized testing environments while implementing the schedule. While Amber teachers described the struggle to complete testing within the windows, they do not challenge the value of the assessments.

### Standards-aligned benchmarks

Jack’s approach to implementation of a data and accountability system as principal at Ryan School resembled that of a coach implementing a strategy to help his team meet the challenges of a new opponent. He discovered the Northwest Evaluation Association assessment system at a summer conference. He thought the standards-aligned benchmark assessments would help teachers adapt their practice to the measured needs of students.

He solicited teachers to preview the program, and with their support, the system, including its regular assessments and frequent grade-level regroupings based on specific standards-aligned student needs, was implemented the next year. The school’s commitment to collaboration, especially across grade levels, facilitated the implementation.

Jack was quick to point out the difference between the regrouping his school does and “tracking.” He emphasized that there is constant movement in and out of groups, and students “are not doomed to be blackbirds

forever and ever.” Rather, once the next assessment is given on another standard, the students are regrouped again. The groups change throughout the year, and teacher judgment plays an important role.

Teacher judgment in using assessment data, a theme repeated by many teachers at Ryan School, is crucial, according to Teresa, a 16-year veteran teacher. She acknowledged that the CST results publicly recognize the good work of the teachers at Ryan, but she tempered her excitement, emphasizing that success on the CST, the API and even periodic benchmark NWEA tests are not the lone goal.

She said, “I played soccer in college, and I am competitive, and I like challenges. But it is not necessarily about winning or test scores. It’s about the process of getting there.”

### Collaborative school cultures

Teacher interviews and observations confirmed the powerful, unambiguous role collaboration plays in supporting teacher effectiveness, and the nature of the collabo-

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ration at the two schools is similar. The collaborative cultures of the schools function symbiotically with the focus on academic achievement data.

Gloria described the role of the collaborative culture at Ryan: "It's not a personal relationship. It's professional, results-based, and kids-based." Her description was typical, and teachers also noted how teams support differentiation to meet a wide span of student needs. They said they could not be effective without sharing responsibility for teaching all of the kids in their grade level, and they based the sharing of students on frequent benchmark assessments.

Effective use of academic achievement data is an essential ingredient of collaborative teams, but the impact and focus of teams is much broader than effective use of data. Importantly, the collaborative cultures also provide significant emotional support to teachers at the two schools.

Teachers at both schools explained that collaboration contributes significantly to the high levels of teacher retention, and they credit collaboration with lightening the workload. At both schools subject teachers described the culture of collaboration as emanating from principals who treated their teachers as professionals charged with pursuing high levels of achievement for all students. That approach encourages teachers to look to each other for support.

### Doing the right thing and seeing results

Teachers emphasized that the most important quality for teachers working at their schools is the ability to work as members of a team. Amber School's Susan said, "The [teachers] that didn't make it here were not team players. It was about them, and that can't be the focus when you are a teacher. It has to be about the whole."

Melissa's explanation of the reasons that she remains at Amber School despite its many challenges emphasized the role of the collaborative culture that Susan and teachers at Ryan described. Melissa was asked why she chooses to remain at a high poverty school like Amber when, as a successful, highly trained teacher she could choose to teach elsewhere.

She answered, "I see results, and our prin-

cipals are really encouraging. Our team is really encouraging. All of these people coming in to watch is encouraging. Although it's a



lot of pressure, it's encouraging, and it makes you feel like you are doing the right thing."

Amber School teachers also viewed grade-level teams as supporting their commitment to high levels of achievement for all students. While pointing to a weeks-long curriculum

map created by her grade-level team during one of their quarterly planning days, Susan noted, "We are all on the same page. This week we are working with two sounds for 'c' – hard 'c' and soft 'c.' We are doing that, and our comprehension goal is fact and opinion. It's posted. We have everything up on the white board. ... It's a little more structured, but it's easier to teach because everybody is on the same thing."

She explained that by addressing common standards at the same time, teachers collaborate to create curriculum and assessments, share successful intervention strategies, and guarantee that students in each classroom receive a quality instructional program.

Ryan School's Gloria emphasized the shared, high expectations of the teachers. She said the needs of students at these two schools require a tremendous amount of work, but that work is accomplished much more efficiently and effectively with the support of grade-level teammates and a faculty of teachers sharing a similar philosophy.

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Dear Dr. Lowder: Superintendent, LUSD

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She said, “We all have that kind of same philosophy that we can work together to do the best in the shortest amount of time. It saves a lot of energy. It saves a lot of planning. It saves a lot of effort.”

### A sense of belonging among staff

Teachers at both schools described the emotional benefit of having strong teams and collaboration at their schools. For example, at Amber School, Susan functions as a mom to many of the younger teachers and refers to them in interviews as “kids.” But her attitude was not condescending. She regularly expresses her gratitude for all she learned from her peers.

She also explained how important the team concept was to keeping young teachers at the school. Melissa described feeling a strong sense of support from her colleagues as she struggled in her first year: “That first year the staff was huge for me. They were such a support. I would call my BTSA mentor, and she would have to come over here and help me pry a kid from under the table. He would not leave my classroom after he had been kicking or shoving chairs or whatever. I knew she was there to support me, and so I knew it will always be OK.”

Teresa described the emotional support teachers receive from grade-level teams at Ryan. She recognizes that being a teacher can be a solitary profession, and teaching at a school with students who have such a high level of needs can be especially so. Teachers at Ryan, she said, recognize this challenge and intentionally reach out to each other so that no one feels alone in facing the daily challenges of teaching in a high poverty school.

### How the principals foster effectiveness

Teachers at Amber and Ryan schools described conditions created by their principals that foster effectiveness, including high expectations for all students. The principals create cultures of collaboration, and they provide effective data systems that allowed teachers to measure their effectiveness and to modify instructional practices to meet individual student needs. The teachers also described being valued as professionals empowered to make educationally sound decisions.

Principals implementing comprehensive accountability systems including collaborative professional learning communities or “data teams” should be encouraged that teachers at two of the state’s highest performing, high poverty schools view accountability and collaboration as the most significant supports to their effectiveness, not as “one more thing on the plate.”

School leaders must take care, however, not to develop school cultures with too narrow a focus on data to the exclusion of teacher professional judgment and creativity. At Amber School and Ryan School, teachers are charged to use sound, professional judgment, and they recognize many more benefits of collaboration than simply improving academic achievement. ■

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Michael Gallagher is assistant superintendent, human resources, Sunnyvale School District.

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